How Safe Are Our Germ War Labs?

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By JOHN HANRAHAN

WASHINGTON—The laboratories have a special entry area where workers don sterilized clothing, then go through a system of air locks and ultraviolet rays into the labs.

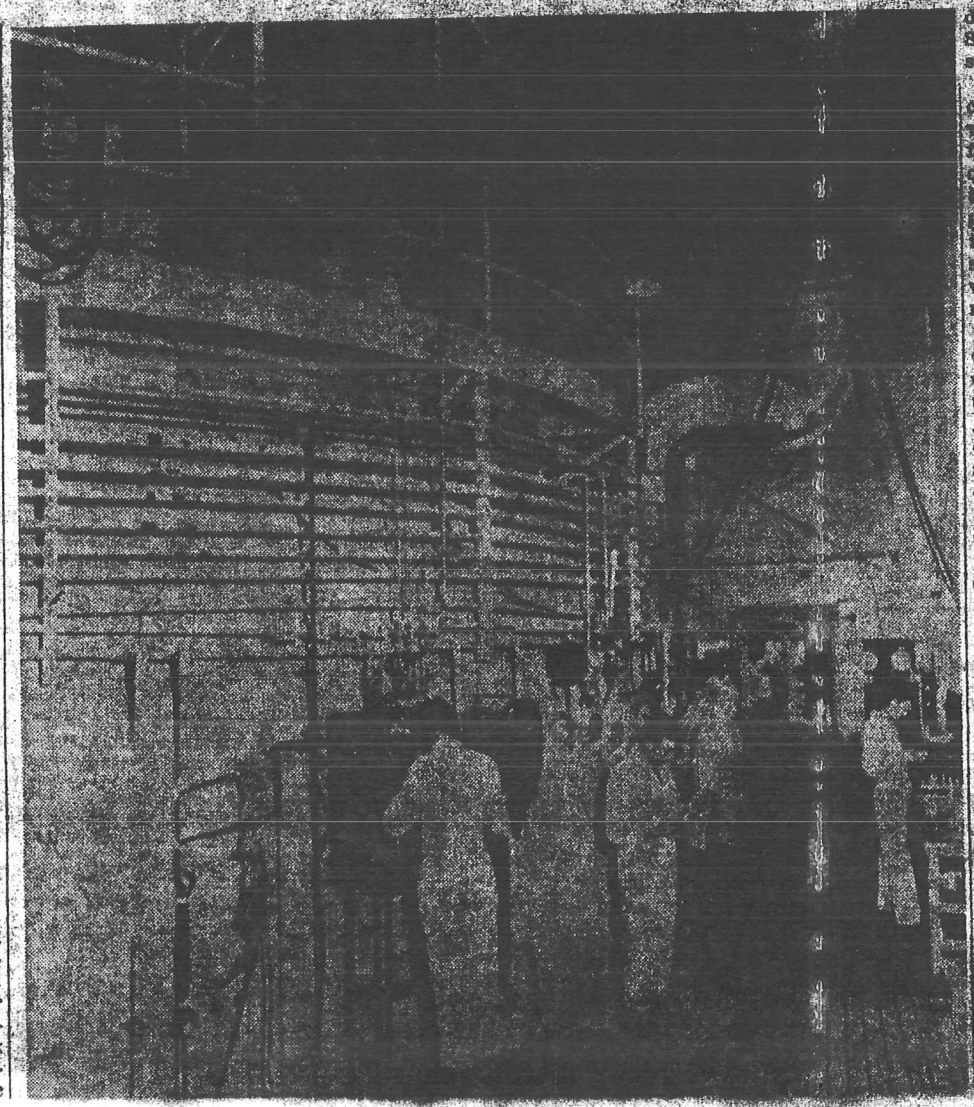
The lab benches are enclosed in airtight safety cabinets with portholes to which rubber gloves are attached. Scientists work through the rubber gloves, so their hands never directly touch anything once it is in the cabinet.

Inside are produced such viruses as anthrax, encephalities, rocky mountain spotted fever, cholera and botulism and defoliants.

The place is Ft. Detrick, Md., the nation's major center of chemical and biological warfare. The process was described by Detrick officials as inefficient, clumsy—but safe."

They speak from the point of view of supporters of chemical and biological research, who see Detrick as a bulwark against a possible future attack by the Soviet Union or China. But to opponents of such research, Detrick is a symbol of the "new merchants of death" who once again are using science for destructive purposes. And they very pointedly question its safety.

For the most part, chemical and biological research, until recently, was free of controversy. But after recent television special reports and newspaper editorials, Rep. Richard McCarthy (D-N.Y.) began to speak out repeatedly against the research and helped stir a public



drawn mainly from the ranks of Seventh-Day Adventists for the so-called "Project White Coat."

Washington area pacifists recently have made quiet efforts with Seventh-Day Adventist officials at the Takoma Park headquarters to discontinue cooperation with Detrick on the program. Church officials defended their participation as a demonstration of patriotism by those who have scruples against carrying guns.

Once workers leave the lab, they are required to shower with germicidal soap before putting on their personal clothing. All air, waste materials and other items leaving the lab are sterilized before they reach the outside air, officials say.

Also, says Col. Gershater, there is no open-air testing of products at Detrick, such as that reported Friday at Edgewood Arsenal, Md., and Ft. McClellan, Ala. When equipment for disseminating biological weapons is tested, he said, harmless aerosol sprays are used. Never, he claims, have diseases been sprayed into the open air on the test field or elsewhere at Detrick.

Detrick officials also note that publications on laboratory safety written by the fort's scientists serve as models in the field. They point out that Detrick scientists were involved in setting up the laboratory that will receive materials brought back from the moon on this week's space flight.

Despite the assurances of safety, there have been problems in surrounding the critics.

outcry against the Army's plans to send more than 800 carloads of obsolete nerve gas across the country for dumping in the Atlantic Ocean.

The outcry was also prompted by visions of another Dugway proving ground incident. In March, 1968, about 6400 sheep were killed in Utah when a test of a nerve gas went astray at Dugway.

In the fiscal year just ended, Pentagon officials acknowledged spending 350 million dollars for research on chemical and biological warfare. Critics of the program have disputed this figure, claiming that Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland, the military's main chemical warfare base, had by itself an overall budget of 421.5 million dollars.

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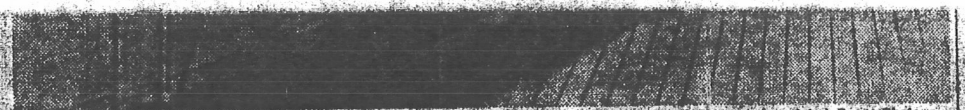
Author Seymour M. Hersh, who has been the leading journalistic gadfly of the research establishment, claims that classified information shows that 650 million dollars a year is a "conservative figure" in trying to determine how much actually is spent for chemical and biological research.

At Detrick, officials said their research and development budget alone for the fiscal year was 19 million dollars.

Located on 1229 acres, Ft. Detrick entails a 96 million dollar capital investment with 155 million dollars estimated replacement costs. With its 2600 military and civilian personnel, including 542 scientists, Ft. Detrick is the biggest employer in the area, pumping some 25 million dollars annually into the Frederick County economy.

In Detrick's biological warfare program there are 1727 civilians, 59 army officers and 129 enlisted men. Of the scientists, 422 are civilians and 112 have Ph.D. degrees. There are more than a dozen types of scientists there including 167 microbiologists.



Associated Press Photo

Technicians at Ft. Detrick, Md., chemical biological warfare test center.

Again and again, the secrecy and the dangers of chemical and biological warfare research and development are emphasized by opponents of the program. This reporter visited Ft. Detrick last month for an extensive briefing and a limited tour and Detrick's top military and civilian officials repeatedly expressed anger over these criticisms.

James Carey, assistant director for installations and service, points out that all laboratory areas are under negative air pressure.

Thus, Carey says, the outside air is at a higher pressure than the entry areas of a laboratory; the entry area is at a higher pressure than the rest of the lab; the lab is at a higher pressure than the freon air tight cabinets.

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The result, Carey says, is that if a leak develops it cannot flow from the lab into the outside air.

Col. E. M. Gershater, commanding officer at Detrick, says, "we operate on the principle that we don't want any leaks from the inside out. Any leaks would have to be from the outside in. This is unlike antibiotic labs where they don't want any leaks from the outside in."

On the end of each cabinet are located "pass boxes." When scientists want to transfer something into the cabinet, they put the item in the pass box, then close the door. Using the rubber gloves, they then open a second door leading from the box to the cabinet and make the transfer.

This reporter visited a lab (not in use at the time) where viruses (causative agents of infectious diseases) and rickettsials (such as typhus and rocky mountain spotted fever) are produced through experiments involving embryonic chick eggs.

The eggs come into the lab on trays, going first to an "inoculation station" where the "seed material" (disease) is put into the eggs. They move through a system of tanks on a conveyor belt, finally ending up in a "harvesting station" where the eggs are broken. The "product goes down one chute, the waste material down another where it passes through a sewage system which involves cooking the wastes at ultra-high temperatures to kill all organisms.

The toxic product is retained for test purposes. Often, says Col. Gershater, the "aerosol" method is used to freeze small droplets of material for future use or shipment to Pine Bluff (Ark.) arsenal for stockpiling.

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Gershater describes Pine Bluff as a "limited production facility" at which biological weapons could be produced in large quantities in the event of a war to "keep the enemy honest." This program's critics maintain that large quantities of biological weapons already have been produced and are kept in cold storage "igloos' at Pine Bluff.

In other laboratories and test areas at Detrick, experiments are performed on animals and human beings to test the diseases developed.

Detrick scientists have worked with, or are now working with, diseases and various strains that include Tularemia (rabbit fever), brucellosis (found mainly in livestock), anthrax (acute bacteria disease), encephalitis, coccidioidomycosis (a fungus infection), glanders (bacterial disease), psittacosis (parrot fever), rocky mountain spotted fever, undulant fever, cholera, botulism, (food poisoning), pneumonic plague (the much-feared, highly infectious disease), 2-4-D (weed-killing compound used for defoliation) and gibberellic acid (plant growth regulator).

Col. Gershater noted with pride that the fort's "Animal Farm," a name that makes chemical and biological warfare opponents wince, often is visited by school groups. It houses thousands of animals used in research and testing, mainly mice, guinea pigs, hamsters and monkeys.

The human volunteers for the tests are prison inmates and the special category of conscientious objectors who agree to "alternative service" rather than actually serving in the military.

The human volunteers are

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In January 1967, the Defense dept. acknowledged that one man had died and 11 others were infected prior to 1965 in a building at Ft. Detrick that had "a hazardous condition." This came to light when a 1.3 million dollar construction contract to remedy the situation was awarded to the Thurmont Construction Co.

The Defense dept. was vague as to what caused the man to die of Viral encephalitis, 10 more to become ill with various infectious diseases and one infected with tuberculosis. It said the infections "were not due to deficiencies in the loboratory" in which the men were working. All of the other 11 who were infected eventually recovered, the Defense dept. said at the time.

Rep. McCarthy raised the question of danger in April and May of this year with a speech inserted in the Congressional Record and with other public statements.

He charged that Detrick had 3300 accidents connected with biological warfare research between 1954 and 1962. He also contended that in 1959 a Ft. Detrick lifeguard caught the plague, yet local residents who might have come into contact with him were not warned.

In addition, McCarthy said, the man died but the accident was never reported to the World Health Organization as is required by international agreement.

"This recent criticism gives the idea that we're a bunch of warmongers, that we live in caves and have forked tails," said one Detrick official during a recent tour. "We're trained not in warfare, but in the business of saving lives."

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